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Utility Shut Off Scammers Threaten to Turn Off the Lights on Consumers During Pandemic



As the world reels from the COVID-19 pandemic, in addition to the threat to public health, the virus is also wreaking unprecedented economic havoc. Tens of millions of Americans are out of work, and many are wondering how they are going to keep the lights on. Unfortunately, scammers are aware of this too. The National Consumers League's Fraud Center has recently seen a spike in consumer complaints about scammers posing as local power company representatives threatening to shut off fearful consumers.

A consumer receives a call from someone claiming to be with the utility company. The caller warns the consumer that their power is about to be shut off over an unpaid bill. The only way to avoid this is to pay up immediately, typically via wire transfer, gift card, or some other payment method that is difficult to stop.

Such a call can be very scary, particularly for those who may need electricity to power medical devices or run their small business. Unfortunately, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many consumers are having trouble keeping up with their bills, which may make them even more vulnerable to this scam. Even for consumers who are confident they have paid their bill, the impending threat of a shut off at the height of summer heat can cause a panic.

To spot the red flags of these scams and avoid becoming a victim, here are some tips you can use:

- According to the National Association of Regulatory Utility Commissioners, electric utilities in all 50 states have placed moratoriums on disconnections during the COVID-19 crisis, either voluntarily or in response to government orders. If someone contacts you claiming that they are about to shut off your electricity, it is a scam.
- A utility company will never initiate a disconnection without contacting you via the mail first. If you received a call from someone claiming they are about to turn off your power, hang up and contact your electric company. Their toll free phone number and website address is typically listed on your electric bill.
- Anyone who asks you to pay an overdue electric or other utility bill via wire transfer, gift card, bank to bank transfer, bitcoin, or any other unusual payment method is almost certainly trying to scam you.
- Utility imposters may offer to connect their victims to federal assistance programs or payment plans to help pay their overdue bills. They just need to "verify" the victim's information. In reality, these scammers are trying to gather the information they need to steal your identity. If you suspect something is amiss, hang up and call your utility company directly.

the IG **FRAUD ALERT**

If you suspect that you have become a victim, report it immediately. You can file a complaint at Fraud.org via their [secure online complaint form](#). They will share your complaint with their network of law enforcement and consumer protection agency partners who can investigate and help put fraudsters behind bars.

Source: <http://www.fraudoftheday.com>



For more information or to file a complaint, contact Pinellas County Consumer Protection at (727) 464-6200 or visit www.pinellascounty.org/consumer.